

Committee on International Relations
Statement of Chairman Christopher H. Smith
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom and
Designations of Countries of Particular Concern 2005

November 15, 2005

The Subcommittee will come to order, and good morning to everyone.

Today the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations will hold an oversight hearing on the Congressionally-mandated International Religious Freedom report and on the designations of Countries of Particular Concern for 2005. The hearing will focus on Countries of Particular Concern (CPC): Eritrea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Burma, Vietnam, China and North Korea; as well as on other countries where the rights of believers are seriously threatened such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Russia and Cuba. The Subcommittee will consider what the U.S. has done in the past year to address these issues and what it intends to do in the coming year. By demonstrating the passionate concern of the U.S. Congress for religious liberty, and by focusing national attention on the challenges this first freedom confronts in the world today, we have a real opportunity to advance freedom throughout the world.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights triumphantly states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." Yet all over the world, one or more aspects of this fundamental freedom are threatened, violated or outright trampled upon. In the totalitarian states of China, North Korea and Vietnam, there is open war against religious believers who will not toe the line and submit their consciences to the state. Burma continuing designation as a CPC comes as no surprise to those of us who have supported Burma's legitimate democracy movement. The assaults by China, Burma, Iran and Cuba against religious freedom are inseparable from their general disregard for human rights. There are long overdue efforts to bring all these countries before the UN, efforts which I hope this current hearing will advance, and religious freedom should be a part of any UN resolutions regarding these countries. Sudan has

finally begun to acknowledge the need for religious liberty, but its practices remain unacceptable, and the situation of non-Arab Muslims in Darfur remains horrific.

In established democracies like India and Sri Lanka, and emerging ones like Russia, Indonesia and Bangladesh, members of minority religions face official discrimination and suffer physical violence, in several of these countries even death, at the hands of religious extremists who are allowed to act with impunity. In transitional states like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, thuggish regimes excuse their persecution of religious groups by claiming to be acting against extremism and terrorism. Close U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt differ greatly in the degree to which religious freedom is violated, but all three have barely begun to face their terrible records on religious freedom. In Iraq, where so many have died to establish democracy, the rights of minority religious communities remain precarious. We must not relax our vigilance; otherwise our brave soldiers, allies and countless Iraqis will have died in vain.

We have waited a long time for this report. It is two months late. Yet perhaps the delay will prove providential. President Bush is traveling to China for a Summit meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao on November 19, and the report will help focus American attention on China. China stands out from all other nations not only for the sheer magnitude of its violations, but also for their systematic violence. Last week a number of significant events occurred. The State Department released its annual report on International Religious Freedom, which again laid bare China's war against faith and freedom. Secretary of State Rice announced that President Bush had again, for the seventh straight time, designated China a "Country of Particular Concern" because of its egregious violations of religious freedom. The independent and bi-partisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) issued its Report on its August visit to China, wherein the Commission declared "that the Chinese government continues to systematically violate the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief." President Bush met with the Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace prize winner, and one of the world's outstanding symbols of human rights and religious freedom, not just in China, but in the world. Beijing, predictably, denounced the meeting.

Last week also, in an arrogant display of its total contempt for world opinion and its international obligations, Beijing sentenced Cai Zhuohua, the

pastor of an underground Protestant church, to three years in jail for illegally printing Bibles. It also fined Cai \$20,000, and fined and sentenced his wife and brother-in-law to somewhat shorter terms. This happened in Beijing, not in some distant province, where out of control local leaders could be blamed. This is clearly government policy, and a timely example of China's continuing refusal to observe its international obligations to respect religious freedom and human rights.

For years we have been assured by China, and its American supporters, that trade with China and economic reform would usher a modicum of respect for basic human rights and fundamental liberties. The trade-off between economic freedom and human rights was only temporary, we were told. As the USCIRF Report so aptly states, "this argument can no longer be sustained." In fact, as the Commission demonstrates, "the room for political openness, public activism, and greater civil and individual freedoms is narrowing." The State Department report, and the CPC designation, also both make it clear that there has been no overall improvement in respect for religious freedom in China. All religious people suffer, but members of "unofficial" churches, such as Catholics, members of Protestant house churches, and Falun Gong practitioners, and ethnic minorities, such as Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, bear the brunt of abuses which range from harassment and arbitrary detention in prisons, psychiatric facilities and reeducation-through-labor camps to torture and death. The simple fact of the matter is that the dictatorship in China oppresses, tortures, and mistreats tens of millions of its own citizens.

There is mounting concern in Congress, throughout the government, and across the country concerning Chinese public policy. Yesterday, I and 21 of my colleagues in the House of Representatives from both parties sent President Bush a letter urging him to make human rights and religious freedom a major topic of his discussions with President Hu Jintao. I urge all Americans, indeed all concerned members of the international community, to express to President Bush the urgency of raising China's violations against human rights and religious freedom in that summit meeting, as he has done before. We commend the President and his administration for keeping religious freedom issues front and center, and declare our full support for his continuing efforts. Only by keeping the attention of the world focused on religious persecution in China can we hope to finally convince China's leaders of its ultimate futility.

The timing of this hearing is providential in perhaps another way. All this week, in all Roman Catholic churches throughout the world, every day at Mass a passage from the Books of the Maccabees will be read. Those books tell of the terrible persecution the Jewish people suffered over 2,000 years ago to preserve their faith. The tales of torture, against innocent men, women and children, unfortunately are all too similar to what is still happening today in other parts of the world to other believers. But the Books of the Maccabees are not just histories of persecution: they are also the record of resistance, and of the ultimate triumph of faith, a triumph the Jewish people still commemorate every year in the Feast of Hanukkah. The cause of religious freedom will triumph. We must do our part to see that it does.

The concern of the United States for religious freedom is rooted in thousands of years of tradition, anchored by our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. It based on a fundamental dedication for individual human dignity and the rule of law. By passionately defending the rights of all believers everywhere, we demonstrate to a skeptical world that America is truly committed to freedom, and not simply to its own national interest. Or perhaps better, that freedom is America's national interest.